



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/07292473.2017.1384138](https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2017.1384138)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

McCartney, H. B. (2017). Commemorating the centenary of the Battle of the Somme in Britain. *War and Society*, 36(4), 289-303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2017.1384138>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Commemorating the centenary of the Battle of the Somme in Britain

Helen B. McCartney*

King's College London

Centenaries play a dynamic role in revitalizing the symbolic significance of historical events. They generate opportunities for discussing familiar public narratives and for re-appraisal or re-affirmation of their meaning and relevance to the societies commemorating their past.¹ The Battle of the Somme has dominated British public narratives of the First World War for many decades. It has come to epitomize a particular narrative of the war, being interpreted as a bloody and futile episode in a wider war lacking meaning.² Its enduring cultural resonance ensured that it was marked as a key moment in the British centenary calendar.³ Building on historical work that has examined modes of remembrance and meaning for previous anniversaries, this article seeks to investigate the effect the centenary moment has had on public discussion of the Battle of the Somme.⁴

¹ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), kindle edition, Loc. 4223.

² Dan Todman, *The Great War: myth and memory* (London: Hambledon, 2005), p. 221.

³ Keith Jeffery, 'Commemoration in the United Kingdom: A multitude of memories', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 50, 3, 2015, pp. 562-7.

⁴ Daniel Todman, 'The Ninetieth Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme', in Michael Keren and Holger Herwig (eds.), *War, Memory and Popular Culture: essays on modes of remembrance and commemoration* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2008); Mark Connelly, *The Great War, Memory and Ritual: Commemoration in the City and East London, 1916 – 1939* (London: Boydell and Brewer, 2001); Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995); David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2013); Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Stephen Heathorn, *Haig and Kitchener in Twentieth-Century Britain: Remembrance, Representation and Appropriation* (Burlington Vt. : Ashgate, 2013); Jenny Macleod, 'The Fall and Rise of Anzac day: 1965 and 1990 compared', *War and Society*, 20, 1, 2002. For analysis of the current centenary see: Andrew Mycock, 'The First World War Centenary in the UK: A Truly National Commemoration?' *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 103, 2, 2014; Catriona Pennell, Learning Lessons from War? Inclusions and Exclusions in Teaching First World War History in English Secondary Schools, *History and Memory*, Vol. 28, 1, 2016, p. 51; Bart Ziino, (ed.), *Remembering the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2013); Helen B. McCartney, 'The First World War soldier and his contemporary image in Britain' *International Affairs* 90: 2, 2014; Jeffery, 'Commemoration in the United Kingdom'; Joan Beaumont, 'Symposium: Introduction: The Politics of Memory: Commemorating the Centenary of the First World War.' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 50, 3, 2015; Dan Todman, 'Something About Who We Are as a People': Government, Media, Heritage and the Construction of the Centenary', *20th Century British History*, 27, 4, 2016; Lucy Noakes, 'My Husband is Interested in War Generally': gender, family history and the emotional legacies of total

As Jay Winter reminds us, a wide range of actors generate different commemorative practices that help create public narratives. Ceremonial activities, artistic and literary outputs, museum exhibits, journalism and television documentaries all contribute, in different ways, to the construction of public scripts about the war.⁵ This article will examine one genre, that of public art as memorial, because it offers opportunities to examine the ways in which memorial designers and the public have interacted. Alon Confino has highlighted the importance of transactions between the personal and general in interrogating the production of public narratives.⁶ These artworks help to provide some insight into these transactions and their implications for the development of Somme narratives in 2016.

Through attending to the participatory nature of the artworks and the propensity of individual actors to draw meaning from commemoration that resonates with their lives, this article argues that while overarching commemorative themes from previous anniversaries were perpetuated at the centenary, the interpretation of those themes was more variegated. A greater number of actors with divergent preoccupations were interpreting the themes in a public forum, diversifying the meaning of the Battle of the Somme for the British public.

The rise of the Battle of the Somme in British popular narratives

In the years following the First World War the 1916 Battle of the Somme did not define the British war experience. It was viewed as an important battle but it was one battle amongst many that held personal and political significance for the British public. Mark Connelly has shown how Ypres became a key site of pilgrimage in the inter-war period. This was a city that held redemptive connotations and, as a site of hope, could chime with a widespread desire to derive meaning from human loss.⁷

It was not until the 1960s that the Somme became elevated in popular consciousness. As Dan Todman has argued, multiple interpretations of the First World War began to be crowded out of public scripts by a reduced narrative that stressed casualties and the futility of war.⁸ It was the emergence of this

war', *Women's History Review*, 2017; Helen B. McCartney, 'The First World War Soldier and his Contemporary Image in Britain', *International Affairs* 90, 2, 2014; David Reynolds: Britain, the Two World Wars and the Problem of Narrative' *The Historical Journal*, 60, 1, 2017.

⁵ Jay Winter, 'The generation of memory: reflections on the "memory boom" in contemporary historical studies', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington DC*, No. 27, 2000, pp. 69-92.

⁶ Alon Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method', *The American Historical Review*, 102, 5, 1997, p. 1395.

⁷ Mark Connelly, 'The Ypres League and the Commemoration of the Ypres Salient, 1914 – 1940', *War in History* Vol. 16, 1, 2009, pp. 74-76.

⁸ Todman, *The Great War*, p. 221.

simplified narrative that allowed the Battle of the Somme to become a dominant feature of British commemoration. Through constructing a story of the Somme, itself simplified, to fit the futility narrative, it became possible to encapsulate the meaning of the war for the British.⁹

This story of the Somme was shaped by a memory boom that connected the British public with their recent past through the traumatic experiences of individuals.¹⁰ From the 1970s a plethora of influential popular histories emerged which constructed a narrative through eyewitness accounts, often derived from interviews conducted decades after the battle.¹¹ As David Reynolds has argued, these histories helped to create an image of the First World War as a 'saga of personal tragedies', and reinforced the futile interpretation of the Battle of the Somme.¹²

The casualties on the first day of the battle were central to the story; the vast numbers of dead on July 1st 1916 lending themselves to supporting a futility script. The Battle of the Somme also became the story of the individuals and units who fought. Although in the minority, members of the Pals battalions could be used to tell a story about idealistic volunteers who had joined the army together to defend their country, only to be slaughtered for no gain in a single day.¹³ Those soldiers who survived the experience were portrayed as disenchanted with the aims and conduct of the war; the communities from which they came, devastated by the impact of mass death.¹⁴ The Battle of the Somme became interpreted as a watershed in British attitudes towards the conflict, marking the death of idealism and the beginning of British disillusionment with the war's aims and its leaders.¹⁵

⁹ Mark Connelly, 'The Great War, Part 13: The Devil is Coming', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* Vol. 22, 1, 2002, pp. 21-8.

¹⁰ Jay Winter, 'The generation of memory: reflections on the "memory boom" in contemporary historical studies', *Archives and Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1: 0, 2007, p. 391.

¹¹ Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the the Somme: 1 July 1916* (London: Book club edn., 1971); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme* (London, Penguin, 1976); Lyn Macdonald, *Somme* (London: Michael Joseph, 1983); Jon Cooksey, *Barnsley Pals* (Barnsley: The Barnsley Chronicle Ltd, 1986).

¹² David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2013), kindle edition, Loc. 6614.

¹³ For a recent example, see: 'The young Leeds Pals who died in a moment', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 11 November 2013, <http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/offbeat/the-young-leeds-pals-who-died-in-a-moment-1-6234556>, accessed 06 March 2017.

¹⁴ William Turner, *Accrington Pals: The 11th Service Battalion (Accrington), East Lancashire Regiment* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 1993), p. 247.

¹⁵ John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), p. 321; Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3; For a discussion of how the negative image of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig developed and became increasingly associated with failure and the Battle of the Somme, see Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 89-90.

The point at which these narratives surrounding the Somme gained primacy is challenging to pinpoint. Paul Cornish argues that when the Imperial War Museum's First World War exhibition was renewed in the 1980s, other campaigns, including Gallipoli and Passchendaele, were still equally resonant.¹⁶ Yet certainly by the early 1990s, the Somme had become the most significant battle in the British popular narrative about the war and helped to solidify the image of the soldier as a victim of a pointless, bloody and poorly-led conflict.¹⁷ And it retained this status over the following twenty years. This article seeks to investigate whether the established interpretation of the Battle of the Somme has been transformed by centenary commemoration.

Somme commemorative projects 2016

Three commemorative projects were chosen to interrogate British attitudes towards the Battle of the Somme in 2016. The projects analysed were selected for their diversity in funding, geography and intent as well as for their public engagement opportunities. They included those that were directly government-funded, those run by non-governmental organisations using public money and privately funded projects. Some had a charitable aim, raising money for contemporary causes. For other projects, the main objective was simply to mark the centenary. All engaged the British public in ways that encouraged active participation, often using digital technology and social media to generate interest, expand their potential audience and encourage public collaboration in their evolving memorials.¹⁸ These projects have been shaped by what Andrew Hoskins has termed the 'connective turn', in which online media turns audiences from observers to participants in commemorative events.¹⁹

The first project was the privately funded art installation, the Shrouds of the Somme. It staged 19240 hand-stitched shrouded figures to represent the dead on the first day of the battle. It opened to the public on 01 July 2016 in Exeter and was re-configured in front of Bristol Cathedral in November 2016. During the two-week exhibition over 145,000 people viewed the exhibit in person. The project had a popular facebook page and a website which showcased public responses to the artwork, photographs and video. Drone footage of the Exeter display has now been downloaded 13 million times.²⁰ The project was conceived

¹⁶ Paul Cornish, 'The Imperial War Museums and the Centenary of the First World War', *20th Century British History*, 27, 4, 2016, p. 316.

¹⁷ McCartney, 'The First World War Soldier', p. 303.

¹⁸ Tom Sear has also discussed the ways in which the internet and social media have created an alternative commemorative space in relation to the Australian First World War Centenary. See Tom Sear, 'Dawn Servers: Anzac Day 2015 and hyperconnective commemoration' in Brad West (ed.), *War, Memory and Commemoration* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 69-89.

¹⁹ Andrew Hoskins, 'The New War Ecology', in Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates, *Beyond Gallipoli: New Perspectives on ANZAC* (Clayton: Monash University Press, 2016), p. 83.

²⁰ 'Shrouds of the Somme', <http://shroudsofthesomme.com/?s=visitors>, accessed 28 March 2017; <https://www.facebook.com/shroudsofthesomme/?fref=ts>, accessed 28 March 2017.

by an artist, Rob Heard, who was inspired by thinking about the consequences of contemporary wars for soldiers during his own recovery from injury and by a radio programme about the Battle of the Somme.²¹ Its proceeds have been donated to local branches of military charities and local community funds. Following the success of the initial exhibitions, a campaign has been launched to generate another display to mark the centenary of the end of the war.²²

The second project considered was 'We're here because we're here' –the nation-wide memorial that saw 1400 volunteers don First World War army uniform and move, choreographed, around the country. Each volunteer represented a soldier killed on July 01 1916 and silently distributed cards detailing the personal details and date of his death. Commissioned by 14-18 NOW, the official arts programme commemorating the centenary of the First World War in Britain, it was conceived by artist Jeremy Deller in conjunction with Rufus Norris, director of the National Theatre.²³ The result was a new kind of memorial which was path-breaking in conception and ambitious in scope. It was designed to reach a much wider range of people than most commemorative activities that rely on individuals making an active choice to contribute or attend.²⁴ Moreover, in an attempt to ensure that the memorial was seen in different geographical areas, the coordination of all the national theatres was required, a challenge that had never previously been attempted. Appearing in non-traditional places, their presence was intended to be startling and potentially uncomfortable, and made a lasting impression on the British public.²⁵ Thousands of images and videos were uploaded to social media platforms with the hashtag, #wearehere; the final work being made by contributions from the public themselves.²⁶

The last project analysed was the national commemoration held at Heaton Park, Manchester. This was the government-organised event to mark the centenary of the Somme, with Heaton Park, the former training ground of the Manchester Pals, providing an explicit link to the Pals battalions.²⁷ The programme incorporated a ceremony at Manchester cathedral, historical talks and displays, an evening concert on 01 July 2016 and a crowd-sourced project which engaged members of the public to create memory squares. The squares were made in a

²¹ 'Shrouds of the Somme: Artist's memorial to war dead, BBC Arts, 30 June 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/KQHNmmMK0hwLB8WLvtmznT/shrouds-of-the-somme-artists-memorial-to-war-dead>, accessed 10 May 2017.

²² Shrouds of the Somme, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/622425218/shrouds-of-the-somme>, accessed, 30 May 2017.

²³ 14-18 NOW, We're here because we're here, <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/we-are-here-about>, accessed 23 November 2016.

²⁴ Jeremy Deller, We're here because we're here, BBC Four, 13 November 2016.

²⁵ 14-18 NOW, Meet the creatives behind 'We're here because we're here', Discussion at the National Theatre, 15 July 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJEy5Y3JFCU>, accessed 20 October 2016.

²⁶ Mark Sinclair, 'We're Here Because We're Here – A silent commemoration of the soldiers of the Somme', *Creative Review*, 01 July 2016.

²⁷ 'Heaton Park during the First World War' http://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/500306/heaton_park/7158/heaton_park_during_the_first_world_war, accessed 23 November 2016.

series of clay workshops or produced individually and uploaded to an online gallery. The designs were then printed onto memorial tiles and used to form a temporary 'Path of the Remembered' at the Heaton Park event. The progress of the Path and individual contributions were disseminated via Twitter.²⁸ The commemorative activities in Manchester were intended to be a focus for the nation's commemoration, but a combination of the weather, the fact that much of the organization was devolved to Manchester City Council and the short time-frame for producing the Path's tiles, meant that it became largely a regional commemoration in practice.²⁹ Nevertheless, 36,000 people attended the commemorations and 2,400 contributed a tile to the path. The memorial tiles, alongside their 100-word tributes to those who died, provide a useful source to examine the official themes of commemoration and the ways in which the public interpreted the project.³⁰

All three projects reinforced key elements of the established narrative of the Somme; the casualties on the first day of the battle, death of soldiers, a focus on individual stories and the history of the Pals battalions. Within these familiar themes, however, different emphases emerged which generated alternative perspectives on the battle. The ways in which the commemorative projects were framed by the creators and modified and interpreted by participants, meant that a more diverse set of meanings were drawn from the themes.

The first day of the Battle of the Somme: a narrow commemorative lens

The British centenary calendar, set by the government, helped shape the focus and scope of the Somme commemorative projects. Influenced by the established popular narrative that elevated the Battle of the Somme above other battles in British memory, 2016 became a key year for official British commemoration.³¹ The Battle of Jutland was commemorated in May 2016 through official ceremonies which incorporated representatives of all participant nationalities and the collective laying of wreaths in the North Sea to remember both British and German dead.³² However, these events were eclipsed by the scale and variety of Somme commemorative projects. In 2016, commemoration of the

²⁸ Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 'Make your mark on the Path of the Remembered', 9th May 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/make-your-mark-on-the-path-of-the-remembered>, accessed 02 May 2017.

²⁹ For example, the 50 workshops held to produce tiles were largely held across Greater Manchester. Manchester City Council, <https://twitter.com/ManCityCouncil/status/746761247908061186>, accessed 22 March 2017.

³⁰ 'The making of the Path – our short film' Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/>, accessed 02 May 2017.

³¹ GOV.UK, First World War Centenary, <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/first-world-war-centenary>, accessed 02 May 2017.

³² 'Battle of Jutland centenary marked', *BBC News Online*, 31 May 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-36390168>, accessed 02 May 2017.

Somme took precedence over the remembrance of all other First World War battles.³³

Not only did official commemorative emphasis lie with the Battle of the Somme, the majority of high profile national commemorative acts were clustered around the centenary of the battle's opening day. This set a pattern that was followed by other large commemorative projects which also focused on marking 01 July, despite the fact that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission highlighted its 141 day duration.³⁴ With the focus on commemorating 1st July 1916, came recognition of the attendant casualties. The high volume of casualties suffered on the first day of the battle, including the 19,000 British deaths, thus became a key preoccupation of these projects. The Battle of the Somme evening concert at Heaton Park had 19,000 tickets allocated, 19240 shrouds were created, and the names that were distributed as part of the 'We're here because we're here' memorial were all those who died on the first day.³⁵ Indeed, the scale of death on that one day overshadowed all other aspects of the battle.

The emphasis placed on the death toll also led to a focus on British military contributions and a narrowing of the commemorative landscape. With the exception of the Newfoundland Battalion, the 19,000 deaths were of British soldiers from the British units that attacked on 01 July. While the official ceremony in Thiepval attempted to pursue a more international theme, acknowledging the participation of enemy and ally, this was not the dominant motif for projects enacted on British soil.³⁶ It was the names of British soldiers that were included in 'We're here because we're here' and largely British soldiers represented by the shrouds. South African, Australian, New Zealanders, Canadians and Indian cavalry all took part later in the battle, but their 2016

³³ In a British government survey 10.3 % of interviewees were aware of commemoration for the Battle of Jutland while 27.7 were aware of the commemoration of the Battle of the Somme, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Taking Part 2016-17, Quarter 2, p. 17,

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/586932/Taking_Part_2016-17_Q2_Report.pdf, accessed 15 May 2017; The Battle of Jutland Commemorative Programme, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-battle-of-jutland-commemorative-programme>, accessed 15 May 2017.

³⁴ Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 'Remembering 141 Days of Sacrifice on the Somme', <http://www.cwgc.org/news-events/news/2016/11/18-november-remembering-141-days-of-sacrifice-on-the-somme.aspx>, accessed 15 May 2017.

³⁵ Shrouds of the Somme: <https://www.facebook.com/shroudsofthesomme/?fref=ts>, accessed 30 July 2016; Manchester City Council, <https://twitter.com/ManCityCouncil/status/746761247908061186>, accessed 22 March 2017; 14-18 NOW, We're Here Because We're Here, <https://becausewearehere.co.uk>, accessed 12 November 2016.

³⁶ Nadia Khomami and Michael Safi, 'Battle of the Somme centenary commemorations – as it happened' Guardian, 02 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2016/jul/01/battle-of-somme-centenary-commemorations-live>, accessed 15 May 2017.

commemorations were separate, marked after 01 July, and received less public attention.³⁷

The Shrouds and 'We're here because we're here' memorials were both firmly situated as national memorials, structured around the deaths of British soldiers.³⁸ The exception was the Path of the Remembered, at least in conception. The intent of the project, following the government commemorative desire for inclusivity, was to foster a variety of perspectives on the Battle of the Somme.³⁹ A broad range of possible themes for tiles were suggested, including the commemoration of munitions workers, wives, widows, children, enemies and allies.⁴⁰ All these commemorative categories appeared amongst the memory squares in the finished path, and diverse representations were displayed prominently within the digitized form of the memorial.⁴¹ However, when the memorial tiles were surveyed as a whole, it was striking that the majority of contributors, irrespective of age or gender, chose to mark the efforts of British or Irish soldiers, and in particular, their deaths in battle.⁴² Thus, all projects, whatever the intention of their creators, had the experience and death of the British soldier at their core. The contribution of allies, enemy, and civilians to the Battle of the Somme did not feature strongly in what became a national, or local commemoration of death in action.⁴³

The moral interpretation of British deaths on the Somme

³⁷ See, for example, 'Walk in the footsteps of heroes', Australian government, <http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/news/2016-fromelles-and-pozieres-commemorative-service-arrangements>, accessed 17 May 2017; '12th July 2016: Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of Delville Wood in the North of France, France in South Africa and in Lesotho', <https://za.ambafrance.org/12-July-2016-Commemoration-of-the-100th-anniversary-of-the-Battle-of-Delville>, accessed 17 May 2017.

³⁸ Jeremy Deller briefly considered representing German soldiers in his memorial but felt that presence of German uniforms on British streets might be misinterpreted and attributed to the Second World War. Jeremy Deller, 'We're here because we're here', BBC Four, 13 November 2016.

³⁹ For more discussion on the British government's desire for inclusivity see: Andrew Mycock, 'The First World War Centenary in the UK: A Truly National Commemoration?' *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 103, 2, 2014, pp. 153-63.

⁴⁰ Path of the Remembered, 'Welcome to the Path of the Remembered: a crowd-sourced tribute to thousands of people connected to the Battle of the Somme' <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/>, accessed 15 June 2016.

⁴¹ The home web page for the Path of the Remembered which hosts featured memory squares displays a diverse range of tiles. 'Welcome to the Path of the Remembered', <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/>, accessed 17 May 2017.

⁴² Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 17 May 2017.

⁴³ This commemorative trend supports David Reynolds argument that Britain has always lacked a 'positive European meta-narrative' Reynolds, 'Britain, the Two World Wars', p. 229-231.

The privileging of the soldier and his death in these commemorative narratives followed a well-established trend that, at first glance, supported key elements of the futility narrative.⁴⁴ Lucy Noakes and Dan Todman have both shown how the prevailing cultural memory of futility has made stories of those who were killed or damaged by war more likely to be rehearsed and therefore more visible in the public narrative in the past 50 years.⁴⁵ However, despite the focus on death, the soldier-victim image was not as prevalent in the 2016 artistic and public responses to the Battle of the Somme.

One contributor to the Path of the Remembered provided a particularly illuminating explanation of her commemorative choice. Georgia Dean, a student at St Christopher's C of E Academy, Accrington, wrote, 'this tile has a soldier on it as even though they weren't the only ones involved they were the ones that took their lives for us.'⁴⁶ This suggests that alternative, potential commemorative subjects were considered and that the decision to mark the death of soldiers was an active choice. An assumed willingness to die in battle meant that those who fought on the front line were considered more worthy of commemoration than those who did not participate. Indeed, even when a memory square was dedicated to a soldier who had survived, the contributor often made reference to the thousands of others who had died. It was the act of risking or losing one's life for a cause that was important to some participating and endowed their contributions with meaning.⁴⁷

Of course, contributions from school children, as well as others who designed their memory squares as part of a group, will have been influenced by the way in which the project was presented to them. This is an important consideration as schoolchildren provided a significant proportion of contributions to the Path of the Remembered.⁴⁸ Catriona Pennell has highlighted that there is a relationship between teachers' values and beliefs and the way in which the First World War is taught, often linked to a moral stance on warfare.⁴⁹ This would have certainly helped to infuse some of the tiles with moral meaning. However, the moral interpretation of the conflict was not confined to schoolchildren and the messages did not represent a wholesale endorsement of the futility narrative.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Bart Ziino, 'Introduction: Remembering the First World War today' in Bart Ziino, ed., *Remembering the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 7.

⁴⁵ Noakes, 'My Husband is Interested in War Generally', p. 7; Dan Todman, 'The Ninetieth Anniversary', kindle edition, Loc. 490.

⁴⁶ Georgia Dean, Dedicated to the Accrington Pals, Memory square, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 15 May 2017.

⁴⁷ Deborah Hill, Dedicated to the Manchester Pals Battalions, Memory Square, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 15 May 2017.

⁴⁸ Thirty-five percent of contributions came from children of school age. Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 15 May 2017.

⁴⁹ Catriona Pennell, *Learning Lessons from War?*, p. 51.

⁵⁰ Indeed, the same school often submitted tiles which espoused a range of moral messages. See, for example, the ten memory squares submitted by Carl Byrne on behalf

Tiles also expressed a redemptive, albeit nebulous message that soldiers died to create a positive future; to create the life they have today.⁵¹

The morality of the war also infused the artistic conceptions of Jeremy Deller, who hoped his memorial would provide an opportunity for the public to reflect on the Somme and the consequences of war more generally. The title of the memorial 'We're here because we're here', taken from a First World soldiers' song and described by Deller as an 'act of sarcastic resignation ... a protest song', provides insight into his own personal view of the Somme's meaning, or rather, lack of meaning.⁵² However, Deller explained that he did not set out to create a memorial with an overt anti-war message. The silence of the soldiers participating in the memorial helped to create space for the public to form their own opinions and reactions without an explicit overarching narrative. Many people who encountered the memorial chose to interpret its significance in different ways and drew different moral conclusions. Jeremy Deller suggested that in the aftermath of the EU referendum, the public were more likely to see the soldiers as noble for sacrificing themselves for their country. He explained, 'You have this thing [the Battle of the Somme] where people sacrifice their lives for their country. It was a total inversion of what we had been going through.'⁵³ It was not that the referendum necessarily determined the content of public responses to 'We're here because we're here.' Indeed, it was difficult to assess its impact as references to the European Union, or Europe more generally, either positive or negative, were minimal. Yet the overwhelming public engagement with the artwork may have been augmented by the divisive and recriminatory political atmosphere generated by the referendum.

Divergent moral messages on the meaning of the Somme were also evident within the ongoing Shrouds project. As part of a fundraising drive for a planned 2018 artwork, the project tweeted, 'For the bravery of all those who gave their lives for ours. We will remember you', a message with positive, redemptive connotations.⁵⁴ Its patron, Downton Abbey actor, Jim Carter, took an alternate view. He explained that, for him, the project gave 'those lost lives a name and a place in our memories forever... in the hope that devastation like this will never

a class of high school students from East Lancashire, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 17 May 2017.

⁵¹ Libby Elliot, Dedicated to all those who fought at the Somme, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 17 May 2017.

⁵² Jeremy Deller, We're here because we're here, BBC Four, 13 November 2016.

⁵³ Jeremy Deller, We're here because we're here, BBC Four, 13 November 2016; Nicola Oakley, 'Brits moved to tears by "walking ghosts": Somme tribute which "puts Brexit in perspective"', *Mirror*, 01 July 2016, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/brits-moved-tears-walking-ghosts-8323603>, accessed 02 May 2017.

⁵⁴ Shrouds of the Somme, <https://twitter.com/shroudsofsomme/status/869277278034948096>, accessed 30 May 2017.

happen again.’⁵⁵ The Shrouds of the Somme actively promoted differing moral messages as part of its fundraising appeal.

The public interpretation of death on the Somme appeared to be changing with the centenary, something that was acknowledged and encouraged by those who created the commemorative projects. The consequences of war, and the sense of trauma and loss, remained a strong theme, linking past and future conflict. Nevertheless, there was a diversification in the moral meanings attached to the Battle of the Somme, albeit meanings set firmly within a national frame of remembrance.⁵⁶

The scale of death and the importance of the individual

The focus on death on the first day of the Somme also raised the dual challenge of illustrating an incomprehensible death toll, while at the same time recognizing the impact of the battle on the individual. It was a challenge acknowledged by all the projects discussed here. The Shrouds of the Somme, in particular, was designed to connect the ‘vast scale of death with individual families’.⁵⁷ The arresting vista of the shrouds laid out, side by side over large spaces, was intended to provide the public with a visual understanding of the 19000 dead, while at the same time, each shrouded figure was unique. As the figures were wrapped by the artist in their calico shrouds, they took ‘on their own form... twisting and bending into their own unique shape’, representing the loss of an individual life.⁵⁸

The project stressed the effort that has been and is yet to be expended by the artist in constructing the shrouds, and the responsibility of remembering the vast numbers of dead equally, as individuals. For the artist, Rob Heard, creating a unique shrouded figure and associating it directly with the name of a dead soldier was part of the commemorative process through which the project acknowledged individual loss as well as the collective price paid on the first day of the Somme. Heard explained, ‘Each man deserves his moment in time, by one man who happens to be me.’ He feels ‘a deep need to say the names aloud and

⁵⁵ Shrouds of the Somme, ‘Jim Carter announced as patron’, <http://shroudsofthesomme.com/blog/jim-carter-announced-patron/>, accessed 01 June 2017

⁵⁶ This sort of contested commemoration has been noted elsewhere, albeit for differing reasons. See, for example, Bruce C. Scates, ‘Manufacturing Memory at Gallipoli’, in Keren and Herwig, *War, Memory and Popular Culture*, Loc. 1035.

⁵⁷ ‘Shrouds of the Somme’, <http://shroudsofthesomme.com/?s=visitors>, accessed 28 March 2017.

⁵⁸ Sam Rkaina, ‘Art project creating figures of all 19,240 soldiers killed on the bloodiest day in British military history’, *Mirror*, 11 October 2015, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/art-project-creating-figurines-19240-6613727>, accessed 11 December 2016.

take a moment to imagine their lives and what they must have gone through'⁵⁹ They were not just seen as names, but individuals with lives, families and friends.

The Shrouds of the Somme has been described as 'a new form of remembrance in which the individual is honoured', but while the scale of temporary memorials, constructed on British soil, is a new phenomenon, the focus on individual deaths is not.⁶⁰ The privileging of the individual in First World War commemoration has always been important. Jay Winter has highlighted that the presence of names on memorials was integral to the mourning process of the bereaved during and after the war.⁶¹ Indeed, since the 1970s, the way in which the Somme story has been narrated has been through the experience of individuals.⁶² The impetus behind acknowledgement of the individual may have changed, but the recognition of individual death retains its significance and resonance in twenty-first century memorialization.

In the 2006 Somme commemorations, Dan Todman identified a public desire to mark the battle as a significant national event as it 'slipped over the horizon of lived memory'.⁶³ With the death of the last veterans in the intervening decade, this desire has not gone away and has been accentuated by the centenary moment.⁶⁴ The Somme commemorations in 2016 were viewed as perhaps one of the last opportunities to mark the contributions of individuals to the Battle of the Somme collectively, certainly on a grand scale. The projects, themselves, have reflected this feeling through their digital strategies for preserving both the artwork and public response.⁶⁵ Adopting an approach that allowed for the scale of death to be illustrated, physically, for a temporary period, while at the same time leaving a digital legacy was an important component of all projects.⁶⁶ Moreover, the fact that the names of the dead and individual contributions to the artworks will have a digital life beyond the centenary was central to the motivation of many of those involved in Somme commemorations. Indeed, contributors to the Path of the Remembered in particular, often explained that they wished to ensure deaths of individual soldiers in the First World War were marked for posterity. There was an understanding that digital commemoration would allow individuals to be recognized in 2016 and, importantly, in the future

⁵⁹ Shrouds of the Somme, 'Memory and loss; why it is important we remember our distant relatives', <http://shroudsofthesomme.com/news/memory-loss-important-remember-distant-relatives/>, accessed 15 May 2017.

⁶⁰ 'Shrouds of the Somme: Artist's memorial to war dead, BBC Arts, 30 June 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/KQHNmmMK0hwLB8WLvtmznT/shrouds-of-the-somme-artists-memorial-to-war-dead>, accessed 10 May 2017.

⁶¹ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p. 95.

⁶² Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, Loc. 6614

⁶³ Todman, 'The Ninetieth Anniversary', p.37.

⁶⁴ Ziino, 'Introduction', p. 1.

⁶⁵ Sinclair, 'We're Here Because We're Here'; The National Commemoration – Our Full Film, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/>, accessed 12 May 2017.

⁶⁶ Jeremy Deller, We're here because we're here, BBC Four, 13 November 2016.

through the ability of different social media platforms to remind users of anniversaries and keep remembrance in the present.⁶⁷

Motivations behind this desire to commemorate the individual within the Path of the Remembered were multiple. For some, their commemoration was driven by a personal, familial connection. Recent research has shown how family history has become an important impetus for public engagement with First World War commemoration.⁶⁸ Those marking the contribution of family members wrote of sorrow and tragedy, but also pride in the behaviour and actions of their forebears. The process of constructing family history is also about bolstering a contemporary identity and a relative serving in the Battle of the Somme offered a range of options through which the family historian could connect to the past. Their soldier ancestors could be viewed as 'fellow sufferers' or moral exemplars.⁶⁹ In both scenarios, they could connect an individual family history, publically, to a significant historical event.⁷⁰

For those who saw the war in moral terms, the creation of a tile was perceived as a way of discharging their debt owed to those who had lost their lives. The debt, however it was conceived, was viewed as an on-going one, that should be acknowledged now and in the future. It was a debt that was owed, above all, to individuals who had been willing to risk their life.⁷¹

Recognition of the individual, however, often went beyond family history and moral judgment on the war. The idea that soldiers deserved to be remembered as individual personalities, with admirable characters, was also a recurring theme.⁷² Drawing on a range of digital archives, contributors were able to glean enough information to reconstruct the personalities of those who died. Angela Clark, for example, chose a soldier named on her local war memorial as her subject of commemoration. Leonard Sibbring had worked as an iron moulder for a local engineering firm, played football for local teams, and on his death, aged

⁶⁷ See, for example, Charlie Over, Dedicated to Lcpl Thomas Mellor, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 26 May 2017. This concept has been explained by Tom Sear, 'Dawn Servers', p. 71.

⁶⁸ Noakes, 'My Husband is interested in war', p. 2; James Wallis, 'Great-Grandfather, What did you do in the Great War? The Phenomenon of conducting First World War Family History Research' in Ziino (ed.) *Remembering the First World War*, p. 21; McCartney, 'The First World War Soldier', p. 304.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the significance of victimhood and the First World War soldier see: McCartney, 'The First World War Soldier', p. 307 and Bart Ziino, 'Family History and the Great War in Australia' in Ziino (ed.) *Remembering the First World War*, pp. 39-41.

⁷⁰ Tracey Binks, Dedicated to William Mountain, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 26 May 2017; Jay Winter, 'The generation of memory: reflections on the "memory boom" in contemporary historical studies', *Archives and Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1: 0, 2007, p. 379.

⁷¹ See, for example, Mason Knowles, Dedicated to Captain Tough, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 02 May 2017.

⁷² Gordon Minton, Dedicated to Corporal Arthur Baldwin, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 02 May 2017.

21, had been described by a local newspaper as ‘a popular and amiable young man who was a fine son’.⁷³ Those commemorated were often situated in a web of family and community relations as rounded personalities who had a life beyond their military service.⁷⁴ Their individual personality was paramount in the commemorative contribution and was not necessarily linked to an overt moral comment on the nature or purpose of the war. Instead, a personal link was often made with the contemporary values of the individual performing the commemoration.

In following this practice, contributors may have been influenced by recent trends in the way in which British war dead in Afghanistan have been portrayed. Anthony King has argued that within contemporary commemoration, the notion of personality has become integral to its definition and production; a reflection of the emergence of personality as a key mode of representation within Western society and the media’s use of individuals to connect people to wider events.⁷⁵ This societal trend may help to explain the focus placed on commemorating an individual personality, by an individual personality. It also suggests another way in which the public narrative of the Somme is changing. While traumatic death and loss is still a central tenet of commemoration, in contrast to previous decades, the representation of the war through individual experience has not necessarily lead to a dominant futility narrative and the image of the soldier as victim. Individual stories have been used to create multiple scripts that fulfil a range of social and personal functions for those commemorating the war.

Idealism, generals and the Pals battalions: a change in interpretation

The Pals battalions formed the final familiar theme which remained an important feature of the centenary commemoration; their inclusion a result of the location of the national commemoration in Manchester and their ubiquity in popular culture. Nevertheless, while the theme stayed familiar, the narrative surrounding the Pals battalions on the Somme was substantially modified. The story of the Pals’ idealism, followed by disenchantment with the war after their experience of slaughter on the Somme, was complicated by more eclectic interpretations of the Battle’s meaning.

Idealistic values continued to be attributed to the soldiers of the Pals battalions. Bravery, comradeship, tenacity and solidarity were all highlighted as part of the

⁷³ Angela Clark, Dedicated to Leonard Sibbring, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 02 May 2017.

⁷⁴ Although not a key focus for the Shrouds of the Somme, this type of personality-driven commemoration can also be seen on the project website. Sergeant Duncan Currie was described in the following terms: ‘In addition to being a good soldier, he had a most loveable nature; his death has been a heavy blow to the battalion, for he was universally popular’, Shrouds of the Somme, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/622425218/shrouds-of-the-somme>, accessed, 30 May 2017.

⁷⁵ Anthony King, The Afghan War and “post-modern” memory: commemoration and the dead of Helmand’, *British Journal of Sociology* 61: 1, 2010, p. 17.

centenary commemorations.⁷⁶ For many, the vast casualties of the Somme continued to create a sense that the heroism of the soldiers was, ultimately, futile.⁷⁷ However, an alternative view was also present which framed these values differently, as worthy of celebration in their own right, rather than anachronistic, naïve or wasted. They were described as inspiring and participation in some of the commemorative activities offered opportunities for emulation or expression of those values.⁷⁸ For example, values of comradeship and solidarity were often highlighted within the projects. Jeremy Deller described the process through which the volunteers performing in the 'We're here because we're here' memorial were trained with an aim to 'create unity soldiers would have had in wartime'.⁷⁹ In a similar vein, choreographer Lucy Hind, spoke of those participating in the Somme 100 Pals dance as reflecting, 'the spirit of neighbours and members of communities coming together to join the Pals'. Her aim was to project 'a celebration of the community we now are because of those things [sacrifices]'.⁸⁰ Tenacity was another recurring value that arose from the projects. 'They never gave up' was a refrain engraved on many of the memory squares, while Rob Heard spoke of stitching the shrouds, sometimes 15 hours a day, despite continuous pain in his hands. For Heard, his project provided him with a focus which allowed him to 'do something extraordinary' in the wake of severe injury. In sharing the same value of tenacity, Heard connected with the soldiers he was commemorating.⁸¹ Thus, the soldiers of the Somme could be seen as embodying positive individual and collective values that resonate and have relevance to those commemorating today.

Perhaps the most significant change in the Pals battalion story was found in the representation of the soldiers' relationship with the military command. Contrasting the courage of the soldier against the callousness and incompetence of the British generals has long been a key part of the futility script.⁸² Within all three projects, however, sustained discussion about the conduct of generals and

⁷⁶ Philip Jarvis, Dedicated to George Henry Jarvis, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, Accessed 27 May 2017.

⁷⁷ Olivia Hankinson, 'Everyone who was affected by World War One', Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 27 May 2017.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Liam Wilson, Dedicated to the Accrington Pals, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 27 May 2017.

⁷⁹ 'Artistic responses to the Battle of the Somme', *Front Row*, BBC4, 01 July 2016.

⁸⁰ Kevin Bourke, 'Somme 100 Pals: A National Commemoration in Manchester', *Northern Soul*, 01 May 2016, <http://www.northernsoul.me.uk/somme-100-pals/>, accessed 26 May 2017.

⁸¹ Rob Heard, 'The pain behind the stitching: how Rob overcame depression' Shrouds of the Somme, <http://shroudsofthesomme.com/blog/pain-behind-stitching-rob-overcame-depression/>, accessed 01 June 2017; Rosie Hurst, Dedicated to St John Battersby, Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 01 June 2017.

⁸² Stephen Heathorn has argued that 'simplified class resentments ... feature prominently in later biographical discussion of Haig'. Heathorn, *Haig and Kitchener in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 150.

their moral culpability for the outcome of the Somme was absent.⁸³ Indeed, the Path of the Remembered gallery contains only six memory squares mentioning Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. At least three of these squares were dedicated to celebrating rather than denigrating his generalship, and only one was explicitly hostile.⁸⁴ As Stephen Heathorn has shown, the reputations of key generals, Haig and Kitchener in particular, have continuously evolved, reflecting the 'values and ideology of societies in which they are produced.'⁸⁵ It is possible that the more heterogeneous public messages about the Battle of the Somme have been influenced by a decline in interest and hostility towards British generalship, acting in concert with the retreat of social class as a key category in contemporary commemoration and historical practice.⁸⁶ With this decline, came greater space for the acknowledgement and development of other public interpretations of the Battle of the Somme.

Conclusion

The centenary of the Battle of the Somme provided opportunities to modify British public narratives surrounding the battle. Central themes and structures of remembrance endured. Motifs of mass death, loss and the representation of battle through the prism of individual soldiers and the Pals battalions were preserved. There was little consideration of alternative commemorative categories and the memorials created were firmly located in a national sphere. Official commemorative choices and previous patterns of First World War commemoration helped set these overarching themes for the Somme memorials, rooted in a local or national context. Yet, the interpretation of those familiar themes became more eclectic and their meaning more contested within public commemoration in 2016.

A wider range of narratives now exist in the public sphere, explaining the significance of the Battle of the Somme for Britain. The futility script that portrayed the Somme as a meaningless waste of life is still prominent, albeit modified, with the soldier less likely to be rendered a victim of poor generalship. Instead, the soldier is seen as a victim of the conflict in general, highlighting the devastating consequences of war for those killed and their families. This narrative also co-exists alongside two other significant scripts; one that acknowledges the tragic character of the Somme but sees the deaths as a blood sacrifice for future freedom and another that largely divorces the battle from

⁸³ This trend to downplay the significance of the generals has also been noted in the following articles. Vincent Andrew Trott, 'Resisting Myth: Veteran Autobiographies and the Great War in the Twenty-first Century', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 6, 4, 2013, pp. 328-342; Amanda Phipps, 'Journey's End: An Account of the Changing Responses Towards the First World War's Representation', *Retrospective: A Postgraduate History Journal, Warwick*, 3, 1, 2014, pp. 59-78.

⁸⁴ Path of the Remembered, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/somme100/gallery>, accessed 26 May 2017.

⁸⁵ Heathorn, *Haig and Kitchener*, p. 151.

⁸⁶ King, 'The Afghan War', p. 19.

state goals, illuminating instead how the war illustrates more universal human values.⁸⁷

Contemporary political and social developments all played a role in shaping the more diverse narratives, but it was also the nature of the artistic projects themselves, their participatory frameworks and their engagement with social media and digital conservation, that allowed the expression of a greater range of voices in the public sphere. While retaining a capacity to control and structure commemorative messages through webpage design and media interviews, artists ultimately shared the construction, meaning, and dissemination of their memorials with the public and the digital mediums utilized for commemoration purposes.⁸⁸ It is this approach that has helped the emergence of a more eclectic discussion and allowed people to connect with those who fought in the Battle of the Somme through individual and collective issues that are relevant to their own lives in the twenty-first century.

* The analysis, opinions and conclusions expressed or implied in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Joint Services Command and Staff College, the Ministry of Defence or any other government agency. I would like to thank Dr Robert Foley for comments on a draft of this article and Jamie MacColl for his insightful analysis of the Path of the Remembered, undertaken as part of his Undergraduate Research Fellowship at King's College London. I would also like to thank Dr David Morgan-Owen for his collaboration in conceiving and convening the symposium from which this article stems and Jay Winter for numerous thought-provoking discussions on the topic.

Key words: First World War, commemoration, centenary narratives, Battle of the Somme

Address for correspondence: helen.b.mccartney@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract:

The Battle of the Somme has been a dominant feature of public First World War narratives in Britain for more than three decades. This article seeks to examine the effect the centenary moment has had on public discussion, using commemorative art as a key vehicle of analysis. It argues that the familiar overarching commemorative themes: casualties on the first day of battle; death of soldiers; the focus on individual experience and the history of the Pals battalions have all been perpetuated, yet the ways in which those themes have been interpreted have broadened during the centenary. A greater number of

⁸⁷ For further discussion of this phenomenon see Anthony King, 'Sport War and Commemoration: Football and Remembrance in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries', *European Journal for Sport and Society*, Vol. 13, 3, 2016, pp. 208-229.

⁸⁸ Tom Sear has argued that technical structures and the ownership of online platforms will also play a role in shaping commemoration. Sear, 'Dawn Servers', p. 70-71.

actors with divergent preoccupations interpreted the themes in 2016, diversifying the meaning of the Battle of the Somme for the British public.

Notes on contributor:

Helen B. McCartney is a Reader in the Defence Studies Department, King's College London, based at the Joint Services Command and Staff College. She is author of two books on the First World War: *The Somme: An Eyewitness History* (co-authored with Robert T. Foley, 2006) and *Citizen Soldiers: the Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (2005). Her most recent articles include: 'The First World War Soldier and his Contemporary Image' *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, 2, 2014.